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# AMERICAN SCULPTURE.

By W. I. Stillman.

THE development of the artistic spirit of a nation is one of those problems which, while they perpetually defy theoretical solution, imperceptibly and inevitably solve themselves, practically, by the production of their results under the eye of the philosopher, who yet lingers, as much puzzled as ever, over their rationale, and is as incapable of completing his theory as a child is of accounting satisfactorily for the tricks of a juggler, though he sees them repeated again and again for his cheated vision. The art impulse is born: an artist does his work, and something immortal is given to the world; and we are no wiser than before as to its causes, the means which we may employ to reproduce the marvel at will, or the rules which we may establish to assist the next worker who shall appear on the stage. Like the growers of mushrooms, governments prepare hot-beds, supply every condition that intellectual science can suggest, foster and stimulate the elements of production, yet, know not where to find the seed which Nature, meanwhile, plants in her own chosen fields; and when the season ripens, the plant appears, more probably in some wild pasture than in the places so invitingly ready for its growth.

The principal governments of Europe have established academies at Rome, pensioned the most brilliant aspirants to artistic distinction, announced prizes for essays on the best means of recalling the glories of the early eras of art; and, meanwhile, in some obscure village, or in some cheerless attic of their own cities, an artist springs up and wins his unaided immortality, never having read their essays, attended their academies, or enjoyed their pensions. And they can no more "grow" an artist than they could before this one appeared.

The Sphinx is not quieted, and will still question many theories to destruction: the recipe is not found which shall turn copper into gold, little talent into great genius. All we have yet learned of the matter is this—that, at some time in the life of a nation, there seems to arise a popular ideal, rather of principles and characteristics than of individuals, yet of principles and characteristics which have found incarnation in individuals; and when this embodiment is complete, there comes into existence an artist, who, being of the people, and full of popular sympathies, is capable of realizing these ideals; and he, probably knowing nothing of the existence of philosophy or academy, goes quietly, even half-unconsciously, to work, and there is an end of the thing: an ideal art is ushered into existence, some new heroic type established to win its way to universal recognition.

To this result several conditions are indispensable. A nation must have a distinctive and independent past existence, in order that the principles or characteristics to be embodied may be broadly developed, and that the individuals in whom they shall be given impersonation, may pass out of the range of personal feeling so far as to permit them to be loved and revered, or admired, as the case may be, universally; to become, in fact, myths, in measure: for it is impossible to make heroes, much less ideals, of men of whom we know and see the human weaknesses. If we knew who and what the gods of the Greek sprung from—what manner of men they were, who, apotheosized by time and their own greatness, finally became incarnations of the heroic qualities they had shown themselves animated by, in their actions, we should clear up a curious point in psychology and art; for the real existence of the Greek deities is in, and for, art, and as the ideal expressions of principles. Admitted on all sides as this may be, we do not generally apply it to our own era so as to see that it is only by the same process that new apotheoses shall give occasion to new great artists, and that it is useless to wring the times for art spirit until it is needed for some nobler purpose than to flatter national vanity or exalt national pride—until some great virtue or excellence has already made itself temples and statues in the hearts of men, and

needs only external commemoration from art.

A severely accurate history will scarcely afford material for an ideal art, as a purely scientific people will never find room for its admiration, or give place to that imaginative regard of the past which is the rarest, and, it seems to us, one of the most glorious of national attributes; so that it is only that people with whom there is so much ignorance of absolute history and science, that traditions are more credible than facts—the marvellous more valuable than the philosophic—with whom modern heroes can find the draperies of mist and mystery which shall hide their unheroic points from sight. Washington stands on the record a man of human failings: but, in the popular heart, he is a demi-god, and the apostle at Ephesus were a wise man compared with one who should attempt to unshrine him. His apotheosis has commenced.

Farther, the material for such an art as we are speaking of must be of a purely popular character and origin—its individuals must come from the people, and be renowned for those qualities which captivate the hearts of a free, enthusiastic, and high spirited nation. This condition can only be supplied in full by a republic, where the hero, rising from the people, carries them up with him. England has no such art, no such popular feeling; and we need look no farther for the reason than to its form of government, for its heroes are not of the people, claim no sympathy or love from them, and, at best, elicit only a partial and suspicious enthusiasm. British heroes are a class apart from the populace, above them, and inevitably regarded as in a measure oppressors and tyrants, or, at the most favorable terms, as rulers, and with fear and respect; or, if by chance the masses have a hero, it is some Dick Turpin or Robin Hood, outlawed and warring at once against society and aristocracy, but felt only as foes to the latter. With Wellington the subservieney and inferiority of the people are declared—with Washington their majesty and rights justified and sustained; and, if it be true, as we have said, that these national exaltations are affected by the force of the strictly popular feeling, how true an exposition of the results of the two systems is the comparison between the positions of the two heroes. The higher classes of England may be refined, intellectual, and politic, but the heart, the

feeling, and enthusiasm of any nation are in its masses, and from these qualities the poetry and art of the nation are fed.

Another condition is, that the artist shall himself partake of, and fully sympathize with this democracy of intellect. He must be purely national by character, by education, and by feeling; and this holds so entirely that no artist may even reside abroad without weakening his grasp of those sympathies with the hearts of his people, in the force of which is the guerdon of his immortality; thus losing his clearness of perception of those ideas and traits, the expression of which forms the only true ideal art—that which is alone immortal. He may have all the reverence possible, for the past, but for that past which is ours, which lays hold on the present. It is common with certain theorists on art to insist on a universal character in opposition to this nationalism, and, as nobler than it—as though it were possible for a man to attain the universal before he has expressed the particular! and, still more strange, to know what is common to all nations and ages before he has discovered what is characteristic of his own! Scarcely have we found a man who, in one life-time, could find all that was noblest in his own day; never have we found an immortal work in any art which is the expression of anything save what the artist saw with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. In fact, nothing comes to the artist of theorizing in art, the life and soul of which is *instinct*, and the nourishment of which is simple, straightforward perception; nor can any truly great artist ever tell us why he has done as he has, or scarcely *how* he has done it. It was enough that he saw and felt, and therefore embodied what he saw, which could only be that of his own day.

We refer continually to the grand types of Greek sculpture, but the Greek left us only the gods and heroes of his era, not Isis and Osiris. Jupiter lived on a Greek mountain, and all the demi-gods were the Greek artist's cousins, and he gave them the family likeness. That blessed ignorance which permits the deifying of our predecessors and relatives is not possible to us, much less that which acquiesces in that of the worthies of other days. It was held, in olden times, a sign of woful degeneracy for a people to turn to strange gods, a token of the last stages of decay of true greatness and independence; nor is it less so now; and it requires no spirit

of prophecy to foretell that all modern sculpture which emulates the Greek *forms* must be regarded as nonsense by an age of true taste. Time will declare this more severely than any fallible critic, and will enforce the inexorable judgment that every work which is not born of present enthusiasm must perish.

No! Helicon flows not for us: the cloudy immortals have found mortality, and the son of Thetis, with the king of men, have gone with their rivalries to the Hades, indeed. The Eternal City, even, is eternal only as the dead are; and in all the classic past there is not one *living* artistic motive. The melancholy waste of time and energy which the great *art-fallacy* causes, will probably never be justly estimated by this generation.

There is an element of the art-spirit which *is* universal, but it does not appear in the *forms* of any epoch—it is simply love of the thing represented, the life of all art; and, the only question we need ask of any time, is, has it something which it loves—some ideal? if so, it is time to look for artists. As the heroic ideals, again, are the first to gain admission to the popular Walhalla, and as these are, by necessity, individuals, simple, severe, they call upon sculpture as the fit means of expressing with the most entire singleness, and most satisfactory fullness, such ideas; and thus, by a law which seems almost unexceptionable, sculpture is the first of the arts of design to attain a genuine existence.

There is a phase of art which, in certain states of social organization, obtains a partial regard from particular classes, and which, in the absence of the true thing, we talk about and try to cultivate. It is invariably exotic, and its flowers (for fruit it has none) are such works as our artists paint and sculpture in foreign lands, viz., merely technical—a grand style of embalming little-or-nothings for æsthetic enjoyment, motiveless triumphs over material difficulties. Then, besides these, there comes, sometimes, a true artist, born before the era to which he belongs, like Hogarth in the English school—a cloudlet which catches the day before it comes to the nations. But, in spite of these exceptional cases, we adhere to the opinion that a really grand epoch of art is always ushered in by sculpture.\*

\* We cannot regard the Italian school as an exception to this, as it was but a revival of Byzantine art, itself the ebb of the Greek era, which was ushered in by sculpture.

In order to make this clearer, we shall note a really existing division of works of art into two broad classes, in accordance with their *motive*—one being the embodiments of *ideas*, conceived and felt, the other being representations of *things* seen and thought of: one being the ideal in its broadest sense, the other the actual.

The idealist commences with a conception, for the expression of which external forms are types or symbols, and thus he makes use of them—the actualist seeing something beautiful or excellent, desires to represent or imitate it. With the former, the spirit of the work is complete from the beginning, it is only by ignorance of his language that the artist fails to express himself perfectly; with the latter, the object itself precedes everything, and it is only when the artist does not see perfectly that his work is unsatisfactory. No matter how incomplete in form is the ideal work, or how far incorrect anatomically, it contains the essential element as fully as if it were technically perfect. The Egyptian artist fulfilled the conditions of the highest art; having an idea to express, he expressed it. As knowledge of the external forms progressed, however, the pride of science revolted against his crudities; anatomy and physiology were called to the aid of the artist; and, having reached the point where ideal expression and scientific knowledge were combined in the highest possible degree, in the Greek, the exultation of the artist in his mere knowledge began to overpower his feeling; and art, losing its vitality, passed into decay. The actualist, on the other hand, commences his work by simple external observation; progress, with him, is in finding, by continual study, forms which are more and more agreeable—in representing them more truthfully and completely, and his limit is that of his vision.

Externally, these two in sculpture will always approach each other; but, considered with reference to purpose and direction, they must be forever opposed—the one, from the centre, reaching outward; the other, from the exterior, reaching inward. They may reach the same point, but will never be the same; nor can they ever be comparable in nobility—the one, reaching to and expressing the

spiritual in terms of the material; the other, in the material finding only evidences of the spiritual; the one creative, the other contemplative and recording. It is to the former that we must look for the universal art, because that is the expression of the universal sympathies, of thoughts and feelings which are the characteristics of an era; and so, if one artist fails to express them fully, others must complete what he has left undone—he, as they, are only the exponents of humanity in their day and nation; while the actualist stands alone, seeing for himself purely, having the beginning and the end of his art in himself.

But, the extreme of evil, as well as of good, lies with the idealists. The actualist can only err by being false to what he sees, for that is always good in itself; while the idealist may express the vices and sensuality of an age as well as its virtues—he may find his inspiration in hell as well as in heaven—he may be true to that which is falsest of all things in itself.

American sculpture, of which we come to treat specifically, presents the two phases of which we have spoken, most singularly and equally developed. The great number of works, by the majority of our sculptors, are idle, frivolous things, destitute either of real purpose or technical excellence, dilutions of the antique, paltry nudities which neither the motive nor the means dignifies. It is little excuse for those who would be idealists that there is a lack of ideal subject of present interest; the matter is made no better by going to those of assured contempt.

Absolute portraiture is always a just and noble repose for all classes of art: of this not one of our sculptors has found half the nobility. But, for the little influence which art exerts, it is some excuse that we have few popular ideals, and those hardly so obscure that they may become heroic. *Litera scripta manet*: men's lives once written become literal; history nudges the mythical and the marvellous off the platform, the men stand on, and forever we know that they were men and only men. We have our heroes, but the most that we can do is to forget their weaknesses and magnify their deeds. This, the hearts of the people are doing as fast as the historians and matter-of-fact men will allow. The biblioplists think they help us by their facts! they only deprive us of the power of idealizing those we

love. How long would it be, if we could destroy all histories, ere Washington would be, in tradition, at least as fortunate in his maternity as Æneas; or the battles of our Revolution become struggles as mighty as the wars of the Titans? truly, we suffer continually from the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!

The utmost, then, that we can attain in the line of ideal subject, is that imperfect elevation of our early heroes which, at its highest, is *ideal portraiture*. We cannot lose identity, but we may make them the expressions of all that increased reverence and decreased knowledge may attribute to them. Minerva and Mercury we must combine in Franklin—Mars and Jupiter in Washington. Unfortunately, we have the genealogy of both on record, with the exact measure of the wisdom of one and the calibre of the cannon of the other; we have their portraits and their exact physical feet and inches, and Imagination can only beat her wings uselessly against the stony facts which she cannot break. Washington, at once the impersonation, to the American heart, of all heroic qualities and manly virtues, becomes the Jupiter of our art, the theme of perhaps some new Phidias; and, in so far as sculpture has looked toward him and his kindred spirits, it is moving toward the fulfilment of its function. Though we may not boast of many works of the true stamp, we believe ourselves justified in saying that no modern school has gone so high, and to our own knowledge no single artist, save Rauch, of Berlin.

Yet, it is rather in purpose than in execution that the mass of our sculpture must be judged (and, even in that respect, the unfortunate absenteeism of the artist has done them and us much injury). Horatio Greenough's was a mind of a high artistic order, yet irretrievably weakened by the acquired reverence for Greek forms which gave even his "Washington" a "classical" costume. His knowledge was profound, and his executive power great, but he has scarcely left anything which could arouse the enthusiasm of future times. Richard Greenough's "Franklin" is one of the few genuine works to which we should be inclined to assign a permanent value as a thoughtful and ideal work—a vigorous effort in the right direction. Crawford is deficient both in conception and scientific knowledge. His "Washington," of the Virginia monument, is utterly lacking in

ered in by sculpture. The only art introduced by the middle ages was architecture, which, as an art, was then born, and the motive of that architecture was sculpture. (See second preface to the "Seven Lamps of Architecture.")

dignity and high manhood, though not without a statuesque feeling which, with many, passes for those qualities. The minor statues which surround it are in better taste, particularly that of "Jefferson," but even that is egregiously out in its anatomy; nor have we ever seen a work of his which had not some gross error in this respect. Brown is an artist who combines a high sense of manly attributes with very great scientific and executive ability, admirably subordinated to his conceptions. His statue of "Clinton" was buried, so far as American fame is concerned, in its classical draperies—its cloak was its shroud, and, unfortunately, because the work had many and great merits. But, in his best work, the colossal equestrian statue of "Washington," there is developed a unique and subtle idealism which distinguishes it from all modern statuary. It is not merely that it represents Washington in all the dignity we love to invest him with, in the ease and simplicity of perfect manhood, nor that it is equally just and accurate in its action and anatomy, that we would award it so high rank, though these are not so common merits that they may be passed by unnoticed; but, because, beyond this there is a wonderful expressiveness in the work, even in every minor part of the figure, every bend of every limb having a spiritual significance, so that the whole statue becomes instinct with emotion, even the horse sympathizing in its expression. This is one of the noblest virtues of that art which we have designated as *ideal*, and is something which cannot be reasoned or studied out, but is part of the genuine *inspiration* of art. Then, see with how fine a touch is the work completed: commander, head of the nation though he be, his head is bared—to the people! The hat is not merely lifted off, but entirely laid in rest. Even in his authority he uncovers to the majesty which is greater than his, because it gives him his. Of all works of art which America's sons have produced, there is none of which she has better reason to be proud than this.

We have alluded to the twofold growth of sculpture with us: having considered the ideal it remains still to say something of the actual. Hiram Powers is the type of this class. He startled the art-world with a completeness of realization of his subjects hitherto even unattempted—a perfect and masterly rendering of the least details, which were as new as fasci-

nating, and he won a world-wide and deserved reputation as a bust-sculptor. He defied all conventionalism, and represented just what he saw without reference to the canons of "classical" art. But, he is a pure actualist; his work is all surface; and, beyond that point, he had not the ability to pass. The history of criticism presents no stranger thing than the reputation of his "Greek Slave." It was owing primarily to English critics, who, as a class, are the very weakest authority in matters of art. In fact, beyond a marvellous rendering of the mere flesh qualities, there is not one excellence to recommend it—neither just proportions, nor accurate anatomy; its anatomical faults are so numerous that it would be easier to say what is right than what is wrong. It has no central idea save that of nudity, no more ideality than any individual figure may have; and, all the false sentiment of fanciful sonneteers and commentators has only had the effect to disguise from the public the real nature of a statue, more lascivious than anything Greek art has left us, without its redeeming technical excellence. As a sculptor of busts, Powers deserves his name, but, public taste in America has had no more deadly visitation than the reputation his statues have acquired. Palmer, though a younger artist, is in every desirable way the equal of Powers, and promises, besides, a sense of the beautiful in form, and a grace of line which Powers has not; while his feeling is deeper and more earnest. But, equally with Powers, his art is in externals: he is an actualist; and, exquisite as his works are, they do not belong to the great American school which we feel assured is arising. He is not national because he is so entirely external, and the traits and attributes of nations do not lie on the surface, but are mental and organic; and an artist, to express them, must work from his soul, must be, in brief, an idealist.

Our limits will not permit the examination of the merits of the many younger sculptors of greater or less talent, much less those of individual work—a graceless task at best. There are many indications to be found there which give promise for the future, and to the future and the fulfilment of those promises we leave them.

NOTE BY THE EDITOR.—We give place to this article, not because it expresses our own views, but that this class of art-judges may have a hearing. It does not express our views, and may offer us an opportunity to express, in reply, what we deem to be characteristics of all art—particularly of "American art."

## NOTES FROM THE STUDY.

By O. J. Victor.



HO was the navigator that bore the flag of the United States first around the world? is a question often asked, but rarely answered. Captain Robert Gray, of the ship "Washington"—happily christened—was the person to whom the honor must be ascribed. The captain sailed from Boston on a trading and exploring voyage in 1788, passing down the coast of South America, doubling the cape, up the coast again to the north as far as the then mythic straits of De Fuca. He sailed up into these waters as far as fifty miles, according to his log, taking in a fine cargo of furs, with which he sailed to China. Here the furs (strange place for the sale, of such a commodity!) were exchanged for a full cargo of tea, with which the "Washington" came into Boston harbor in safety, in 1790. During all this long voyage he bore at the mast-head the American Stars and Stripes—which, it is needless to say, was a scarce flag in the East Indies, at that day. What a change has a half century wrought! Now that flag is one of the monarchs of commerce and navigation, and the then wilderness of Oregon and California is now become the centre of a civilization which bids fair to rival that of the eastern shore.

SPEAKING of the straits of San Juan de Fuca: it is in those waters that the island of San Juan is situate—which island is the one seized by Gen. Harney as belonging to the United States. The rights of Great Britain and this country in these waters were, after years of dispute, supposed to have been settled by the treaty of 1846, which definitely determined our north-western boundary. The joint commission of civil and scientific officers of the two countries was instructed to run the line of boundary from Lake Superior west, along the 49th parallel of latitude to the channel of the straits of San Juan: thence pursuing the said channel, in its middle, on to the Pacific. This very important item was not considered, apparently, viz.: that the straits had a good many "channels," in their great width, which might run both north and south of the many islands in those waters. The island of San Juan, seized by Gen. Harney, certainly is *south* of one of the most frequented "channels,"